DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 037 121 FL 001 578

AUTHOR Sargent, Barbara Nelson
TITLE Old French for Undergraduates.
PUB DATE [64]
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the 79th Annual Meeting of the Modern Language Association of America, New York, New York, December 27-29, 1964

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Course Descriptions, Curriculum Design, Diachronic Linguistics, Educational Problems, *French, French Literature, Grammar, Language, *Language Instruction, Literary History, Literature, Literature Appreciation, Medieval History, *Medieval Literature, Medieval Romance, Poetry, Prose, Romance Languages, *Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

A list of six main benefits of the study of Old French at the undergraduate level follows a discussion of the value, function, and goals of such a program. The advantages discussed result in: (1) a first-hand acquaintance with medieval masterpieces, (2) a sense of continuity in the history of literature, (3) improved techniques in critical reading, (4) growth in linguistic competence useful in graduate studies, (5) comprehension of the development of French literary genres, and (6) an increase in the number of French medievalists. Some objections to teaching Old French to undergraduates are raised and rebutted. (RL)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

OLD FRENCH FOR UNDERGRADUATES

ED037121

The teaching of the Old-French language and of medieval French literature at the undergraduate level is not unknown in the United States, but it is something of a rarity. The sentiment in many departments appears to be that the subject is too advanced for students at that level and that there is plenty of time for it in graduate school. Consequently, most French majors, however sound their acquaintance with the main stream of literature from the Renaissance down to the present, take the B.A. degree with only a smattering of knowledge concerning one of the richest and most fascinating of periods, their acquaintance with the productions of some five centuries of literary history limited, probably, to Aucassin et Nicolette, Maître Pathelin, and a few assorted extracts of "Medieval Prose and Poetry", all translated into modern French. Not a few educators would agree with the proposition that this state of affairs leaves a good deal to be desired. Yet those most desirous of introducing the study of Old French into the undergraduate curriculum are likely to be medievalists themselves; to their colleagues in other fields, not to mention the administrators, the advantages of introducing such study may be less apparent. Hence the necessity of giving careful thought to the value, function, and goals of the program so as to present the case for its acceptance most tellingly. Obviously, such appraisal will not serve only the practical end of making the program attractive to departments and administrations; it will also aid those who are trying to

FL 001 578

inaugurate it to see clearly what they are working toward, what goals to aim at and by what means.

The following remarks are primarily an attempt to point out the advantages to accrue from adding a one- or two-term course in Old French to the undergraduate curriculum. I shall also mention some reasons that may be objected for not doing so, and endeavor to answer them, before proceeding to suggestions as to the content of the course and what, in my opinion, it should accomplish.

First, as to the value of Old French in the training of undergraduate majors.

1. The curriculum for the students in question consists in a somewhat limited but nevertheless comprehensive study of the French language and its literature. Majors in good departments are expected during their four years to read in their entirety numerous outstanding works of various periods, genres, and schools, and be able to relate them to the main lines of French literary history. By common concensus, an acquaintance with medieval writings forms an essential part of the comprehensive knowledge expected of majors. The Middle Ages serve as the point or area of departure for most surveys of literature. Presumably, then, this period is generally considered to be of some importance. Yet here is a paradox. On the one hand, students are expected to know something of medieval literature; on the other, they are put in the way of knowing it only at second hand. Original texts are seldom

if ever met with; instead of a romance by Chrétien de Troyes, the average undergraduate reads a translation into modern French or a résumé, or, even worse, merely memorizes Chrétien's approximate dates and the titles of his works.

2. It should be evident that this state of affairs is deplorable. The first and great commandment for student and teacher alike is to read the book itself. There is no substitute for primary literary experience. It is not enough to know <u>about</u> a work through translations, summaries, or literary histories; the direct contact of student with text is indispensable for genuine insight. There is, I think, a real danger to future scholarly habits in permitting students to make do with secondary sources and approximate knowledge. The number of texts that can be read at this level is, of course, limited, since some preliminary linguistic training will be necessary and not much speed in reading is likely to be acquired in the time allotted. Nevertheless two or three texts read in the original will have incomparably more power to reveal the nature of medieval literature than double that number of translations.

3. The linguistic training that must be a prelude to such reading would have its own value. Although necessarily sketchy, it would convey useful information about the nature of the French language, its sources, derivation, evolution, and structure. This in turn would lead to a heightened understanding of modern French, which most people in the field would consider to be an advantage.

4. The gains envisaged thus far are immediate ones within the undergraduate program. There are also longer-range benefits to be dervied from beginning the study of Old French earlier than is now usually the case. It would be of great help to students (and their numbers are increasing) who plan to go on to graduate work. As graduates they would be able to do far more reading in medieval literature, pursue philological studies to a more advanced level, and do better independent work in research if they came to graduate study with the elements of Old French already in hand and some practice in reading original texts. There is no getting around the fact that the study of Old French is difficult and that, with the common arrangement of a one-term graduate course in the history of the language plus one or two terms on medieval literature, the average graduate student rarely proceeds beyond a hastily-gulped minimal dose of the subject, grimly absorbed for the comprehensive examinations and, I fear, speedily forgotten thereafter. The practice of this discipline over a longer span of time would facilitate the retention of its elements and enable the student to proceed to more advanced work, a great advantage especially to those who plan to major in the medieval field.

5. The earlier introduction of Old French would tend to attract students to the discipline, somewhat neglected because not generally known or known too late. The end result might well be a larger proportion of medievalists than is now the case. Even if their numbers do not increase, it is most likely

that those who elect to pursue Old French as their major study will emerge better-trained scholars and teachers if they begin that study as undergraduates.

It seems, then, that the arguments for teaching Old French to undergraduates are numberous. What of the arguments against it? I shall suggest some probable ones, and attempt to answer each.

1. "Old French is too hard for undergraduates."

Yes, if they are not well grounded in modern French and/or the course is presented as if to graduate students. But with rising entrance requirements in colleges, and more years of language study offered in many high schools, freshmen French students are increasingly well prepared and are being placed in advanced classes. This is taking place all over the country. If a student is able to read critically works dating from the seventeenth century to the present, analysing for style, structure, point of view,and so forth, he has sufficient background to begin to study Old French, The subject is already offered to undergraduates in certain American institutions. It is required in English universities, begun with the first year, and carried through to the B.A. If English students can handle the subject, English-speaking students in other countries ought to be capable of it, always provided that they be well prepared. It goes without saying that this sort of course should be tailored to fit the needs and capacities of the students involved. To give a specialist's knowledge

of the language would be neither desirable nor possible in the time most teachers will have at their disposal. Nevertheless, without being too technical, the contemplated course could impart the rudiments of the language sufficient for reading a limited amount of original material.

2. "There is no room in the curriculum for such a course." In many French departments the curriculum already contains a course on medieval literature in translation. If this situation obtains, it is matter of simple substitution of one course for another. If what is involved is adding a totally new course to what seems to be an already full program, it should be noted that, more and more, a French major with a B.A. degree applying for admission to graduate school is expected to have a wide acquaintance with literature of all periods. Some knowledge of the output of the Middle Ages is expected of a Bachelor. If a student is going to read some of this material, why should he not read it in the original? The course could perhaps first be introduced as an elective and later made a requirement.

3. "There are few, if any, suitable texts."
A real problem, alas! Texts to be read at this level should be few in number and moderate in length (i.e., not much more than a thousand lines). Preferably, they should be typical of their time and genre; but this consideration should yield to literary worth and attractiveness. One must not lose sight of the fact that any texts chosen will be worked through rather slowly; the best selections for the purpose will be those which have sustained interest and are esthetically

satisfying. At this level, spelling should be normalized. (If a sin, this is at any rate a venial one; it is very doubtful whether a student, once accustomed to this crutch, will be much troubled by its removal once he is in graduate school.) It will of course be necessary to supply copious explanatory notes and a detailed glossary, as well as an introduction, for each text. Until classes are formed, publishers, persuaded, manuscripts prepared, and the finished texts published and distributed, it will be necessary to get along with stopgaps. Two series that might be used in the interim are Blackwell's French Texts and the "French Classics" series of the Manchester University Press.

Once the above-mentioned objections and obstacles are overcome, the next consideration will be the organization of the course and the choice of materials to be used. One may assume that the course would take either one or two terms. The first term would begin with a study of the elements of Old French, e.g., the case system, verbal endings, the use of tenses, chief features of the syntax. There is no need at this level of going beyond such linguistic training as is immediately practical; discussions of phonology, dialectal features, and the like are better reserved for graduate study. The essential thing here is to maintain a balance of language and literature; the linguistic part of the course should be primarily intended to prepare students for accurate reading of medieval texts. With the introduction

to Old French should come some practice in reading prepared selections that illustrate the principles being exposed. After perhaps three or four weeks of such preparation, the students may embark on complete texts. These should not be long; and about two should suffice for the first term. In the second term (if there is one) they might read perhaps three more. It would be best, because easiest, to giver preference to works composed since the middle of the twelfth century. The reading list should comprise attractive works of the main genres, i.e. hagiography, epic, romance, drama, and lyric poetry. One selection from each of the first four genres and a group of poems would make five texts, enough for two terms. There is much to choose from. For hagiography one might use Wace's Vie de Sainte Marguerite. For the epic, some of the best scenes from the Chanson de Roland, the fame and interest of which override the difficulty of its language. In the category of romance one might choose the Châtelaine de Vergy for its interplay of psychological forces, or possibly Marie de France's Lanval for its suspense and merveilleux. Rutebeuf's Miracle de Théophile or the Jeu d'Adam are serviceable examples of medieval drama. For lyric poetry, I am of the opinion that it is better to read a good deal by one author than stanzas and snippets by several. I should propose Villon as the greatest figure of the period and recommend the inclusion of a sizeable portion of the Grand Testament and other verse. These readings would naturally be supplemented by lectures

setting forth the main developments in literature and showing how the texts to be read fit into their genre and period. (If, for example, Lanval is to be read, the teacher might explain briefly the rise of the romance and the lai, their usual subjects and heroes, the matières that compose them, and their general character.) Such preliminary treatment of the subject could be done while the students are getting ahead on their reading. Later class meetings could be devoted to the specific text in hand, with questions, paraphrase, or translation to ascertain comprehension, and with discussion of structure, conventions, characterization, etc., to promote close and intelligent reading. In this respect, the study of Old-French works can and should parallel that of any other literature, always allowing for linguistic difficulties.

Finally, it is of some importance to have a clear apprehension of the goals aimed at when a new course is contemplated.

In my view, the introduction of Old French into the undergraduate program would achieve six main benefits, all of them considerable:

1. It would permit the first-hand acquaintance with a few medieval masterpieces of various types, which otherwise the students would know only indirectly if at all.
2. By obliging students to read productions of a period and society remote from their own, it would convey both a sense of the unique flavor of each period and a sense of the continuity of literature.
3. It would teach (or give continued practice in) the technique

of critical reading, of giving highest attention to what the author is saying and how he says it. This habit, once acquired,is carried over to all literary study.

4. It would import some comprehension of the medieval literary scene, the period when French literature began and when almost all genres still in use were developed. This in turn would make certain subsequent phenomena of literary history, such as the strictures of the Pléiade and of Boileau and some enthusiasms of the Romantics, more comprehensible.

5. Acquisition of some linguistic knowledge would be a further benefit. Indispensable as a tool for reading medieval texts, a grasp of the elements of Old French would illuminate some aspects of the student's general linguistic training as an undergraduate, as well as lightening his future burdens as a graduate student.

6. The earlier study of Old French might well stimulate interest in the language and literature of the Middle Ages and attract potential scholars to this field, a fair one but in need of folk.

Barbara Nelson Sargent
University of Pittsburgh